

Yezidism

Demographics

- Exact data is difficult, however many sources estimate around 600,000 Yezidis worldwide
- The traditional Yezidi homeland is in northern Iraq, with other major population centers in the Caucasus, Syria, Turkey, and Europe (particularly Germany)
- The language of the Yezidis is Kurmanji

Origin

- Yezidism in its current form developed between the 12th and 15th centuries
- 12th/13th century writers (ʿAbd Al-Karim al-Samʿani, Abu Firas ʿAbd Allah ibn Shibl) mentioned the presence of a movement who venerated Yazid ibn Muʿawiya
- Around this time period, it was also mentioned by other writers (Gregorius Bar Hebraeus, Ibn Kathir) that there existed tribes who practiced Iranian religion
 - Ibn Kathir mentioned a people called Tirhiye who forgot their previous Marian religion and adopted a hybrid religion with Islam
- Sheikh ʿAdi was a 12th century Muslim scholar who studied with mystics in Baghdad and traveled to Lalish, he established his own Sufi order, its followers known as the ʿAdawis
 - After death, his tomb became a pilgrimage site and some began to exaggerate his status
 - The ʿAdawis and Shamsanis (locals who practiced Iranian religions but were attracted to Sheikh Adi) politically allied against the Abbasids
 - After a few appointed successors, Sheikh Hasan is the second most important person in ʿAdawi history
 - Sheikh Hasan was also a devout Muslim and according to Yezidi narrative, attempted to impose Islamic orthodoxy but was overruled
 - It was at this point the divergence from Islam began and Shamsanis dominated in the community
- Yezidism differentiates itself from Islam entirely around the 15th century, although Islamic influence is still clear in much of its texts, beliefs, and practices

Beliefs

- Yezidis believe in an eternal God named Xwede who created a white pearl and put it on the back of a bird, and then created seven angels to delegate his power to
 - It is rare for Yezidis to address Xwede directly and in general he is viewed as largely uninterested in creation
 - God manifests in three forms: Tawûsi Melek/Peacock Angel, Sheikh Adi, and Sultan Ezi
- Tawûsi Melek
 - Essentially the main feature of the Yezidi religion, Yezidis pray to God through the Peacock Angel
 - Peacock imagery existed in both Iranian religion and apocryphal Muslim stories, however it cannot be definitively said the origin of the ʿPeacock Angelʼ
 - In Yezidi belief, he refused to prostrate in front of Adam due to love for God and was rewarded for it
 - Exaggeration of earlier Sufi narratives regarding Iblis
 - Has led to Yezidis being dubbed as Devil worshippers
- Sheikh Adi
 - See Origin section, Sheikh Adi was greatly exaggerated following his death
- Sultan Ezi
 - Identified by scholars with Yazid ibn Muʿawiya, supported by a Yezidi legend of Muʿawiya vowing to not have any offspring and marrying a very old woman but she miraculously gives birth to Ezid
 - Modern Yezidis deny any links with Islam
- Yezidis believe in reincarnation, this is commonly called “changing the shirt”
 - This belief is concurrent with a belief in paradise and hell, largely taken from Islam
- Yezidis believe themselves to be descendants of only Adam and the rest of humanity descendants of Adam and Eve
 - Adam and Eve competed over who would generate the offspring, so they each put their seed in jars, with Eve’s jars not bearing fruit and Yezidis descending from the boy who generated in Adam’s jar
- There exist other figures and deities, such as Sheikh Shams

Practices

- Yezidis practice an endogamous caste system, with sheikhs and pirs being the priestly castes and murids (90%+ of the Yezidi population) being the laymen
 - Every Yezidi needs a sheikh and a pir as a brother of the hereafter who assists them through lifecycle events and receives money for them
 - Sheikh caste groups
 - Qatanis

- The highest level in the Yezidi hierarchy is the mir of Sheikhan and his family who have legislative spiritual power
 - Linked with Sheikh Adi
 - Shamsanis
 - Highest figure is the baba sheikh who has executive spiritual power and lives an ascetic life
 - Linked with Ezdina Mir
 - Adanis
 - Highest figure is the pesh imam who has authority to celebrate marriages and retains some Islamic practices
 - Linked with Sheikh Hasan
- Lifecycle rites
 - Biska pora (haircut): A boy’s first haircut by his brother of the hereafter, signifies he has become a Yezidi
 - Mor kirin (baptism): Done in Lalish’s waters with incantations reciting, signifies that the child is a servant of Ezi
 - Boys are circumcised after their baptisms, a kerif (godfather) chosen for the occasion
 - Due to endogamy with the kerif’s family over generations, generally either a Muslim or a Yezidi from another caste is chosen for the role
 - Yezidis in Armenia do not circumcise as much due to Christian influence, but circumcise dead bodies before burial to avoid the soul being punished after death
 - Marriage: Yezidis generally marry young, with marriages arranged between fathers of the couple and a bride price paid to the bride’s family. Divorce is forbidden except for adultery.
 - Funeral: The deceased Yezidi’s body is washed by their brother of the hereafter and put in a shroud. After the funeral, the family asks a mystic to see the destiny of the deceased, with sinners being reborn as animals and the righteous entering the body of a Yezidi.
- Worship
 - There is no traditional of compulsory or public worship, however many Yezidis pray three times a day facing the sun
 - Wednesday and Friday are holy days
 - Fasting is not obligatory for the masses, although more religious Yezidis partake
 - Pilgrimage sites vary and can include houses of a sheikh/pir, tree, shrine for a saint, etc.
 - Main pilgrimage center is in Lalish, the sanctuary of Sheikh Adi, with Yezidis making at least one pilgrimage in their lifetime if possible
 - Some Yezidi festivals are linked to nature/Solar calendar and have roots in seasonal Iranian celebrations
 - New Year/Sere Sal, Forty Days of Summer/Chile Havine, Festival of the Assembly/Cejna Jema’iyye, Beginning of the Forty Days of Winter/Sere Chil Zivistane
 - Others follow the lunar calendar and are rooted in Islamic traditions
 - Khidr Ilyas, Khidr Nebi, Ida Isa, Ramadan, Sheva Berat, Erafat
- Taboos
 - Purity of the four elements (e.g. only putting fire out with earth, not water)
 - Respect for Lalish
 - Too much contact with non-Yezidis is considered polluting, those who marry out are excommunicated and Yezidis cannot enter mosques or use utensils of Muslims
 - The word “Shaytan” and words dealing with cursing or stoning are taboo
 - Until the 20th century, reading and writing was forbidden for non-Adani Yezidis
 - Food taboos include pork, fish, cockerel, gazelle, lettuce, okra, cauliflower, cabbage, pumpkin
 - Wearing the color blue
 - Marriage in April

Texts

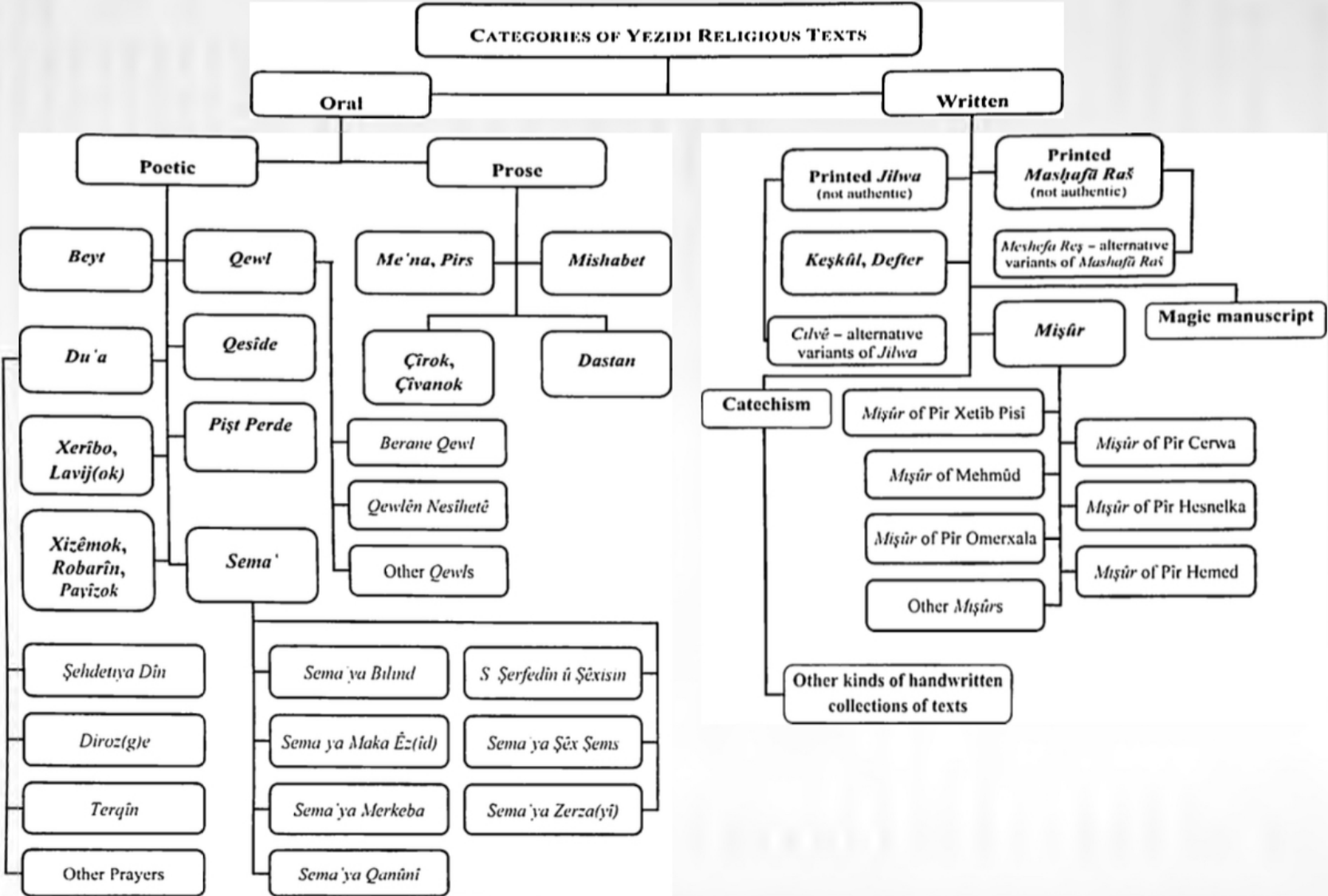


Diagram. Categories of Yezidi Religious Texts

- Yezidism has traditionally been an oral based and orthopractic religion, with attempts at canonization of texts being a recent and ongoing phenomenon
- Kiteba Jalwa and Mashafe Ras are not authentic texts however their context reflects an actual folk tradition and over time these texts have been embraced by Yezidis themselves
- Keşkul: Manuscripts kept in home of priests, each are unique and kept private for families
- Mişûr: Manuscripts kept in the home of some pirs, they are treated as extremely sacred, even being an object of pilgrimage
- Catechism: Gives answers on various religious questions
- Beyt: Mostly devoted to life stories of Holy Men as well as non-religious themes such as love
- Qewl: Sacred poems that enjoy the highest status in Yezidi religious literature, said to be of divine origin and referred to as 'the ocean'
- Qeside: Believed to have been composed by Sheikh Adi's followers
- Du'a: Prayers for a variety of purposes
- Pişt Perde: Dialogue between Holy Men on religious questions
- Çîrok: Myths and legends, unlike poetic texts which contain a lot more Islamic elements, these tend to retain many archaic Indo-Iranian elements